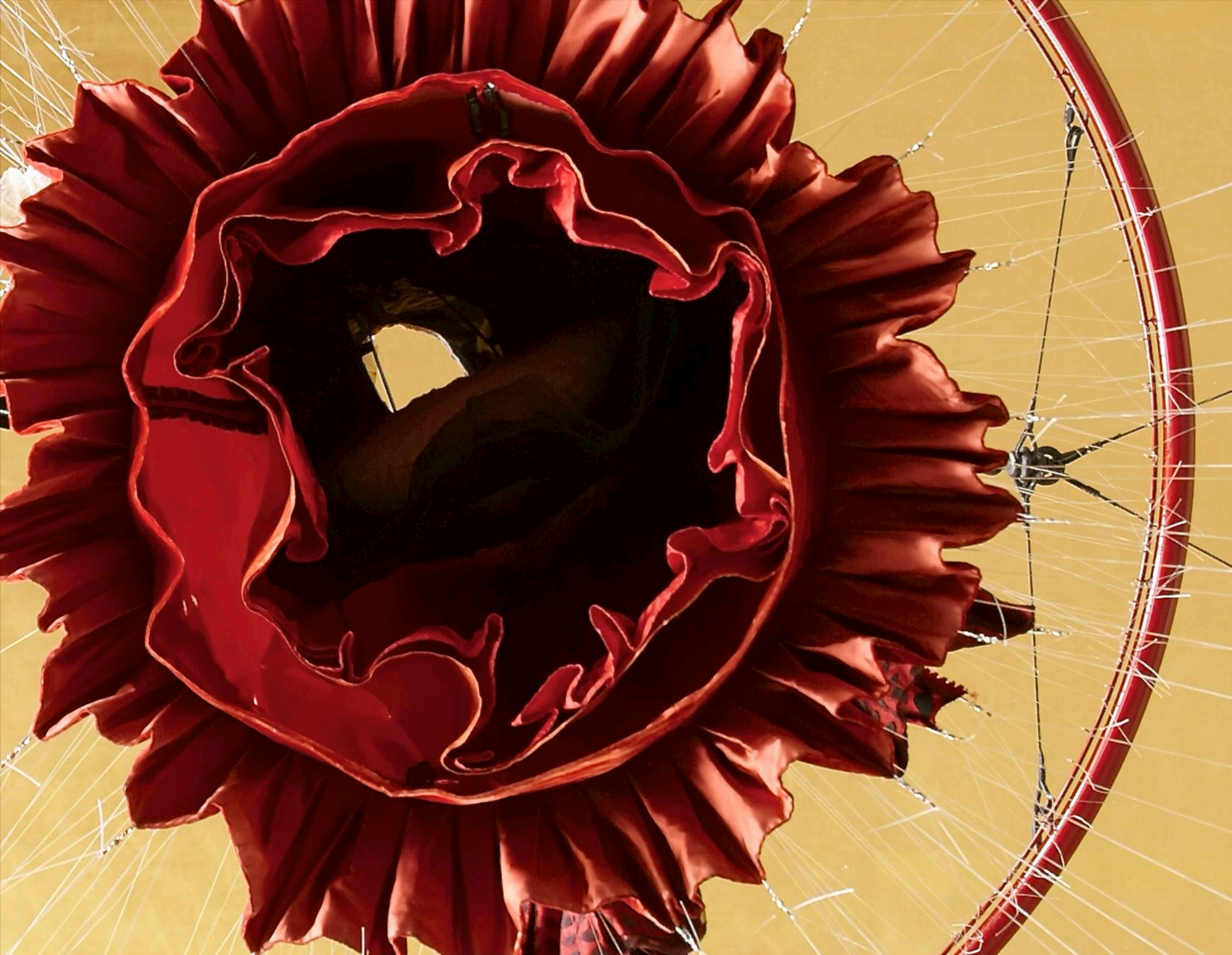
# E.V. DAY

# *DIVAS ASCENDING*

AN INSTALLATION OF SUSPENDED SCULPTURES
IN LINCOLN CENTER
FEATURING COSTUMES FROM NEW YORK CITY OPERA



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## Divas Ascending

AN INSTALLATION OF SUSPENDED SCULPTURES
FEATURING
COSTUMES RETIRED FROM THE OPERA
2009 - 2010

# Artist Statement

I make sculptures that transform familiar icons of women's empowerment and entrapment into new objects that confound conventional readings of these clichés, and constellate meaning in a range of emotions: anxiety, ecstasy, liberation, and release. When City Opera General Manager and Artistic Director George Steel asked me if I'd be interested in making sculptures from costumes from the opera's archives, I was thrilled because recurring themes in my work—explosion, velocity, spectacle—have an energy that might be termed "operatic."

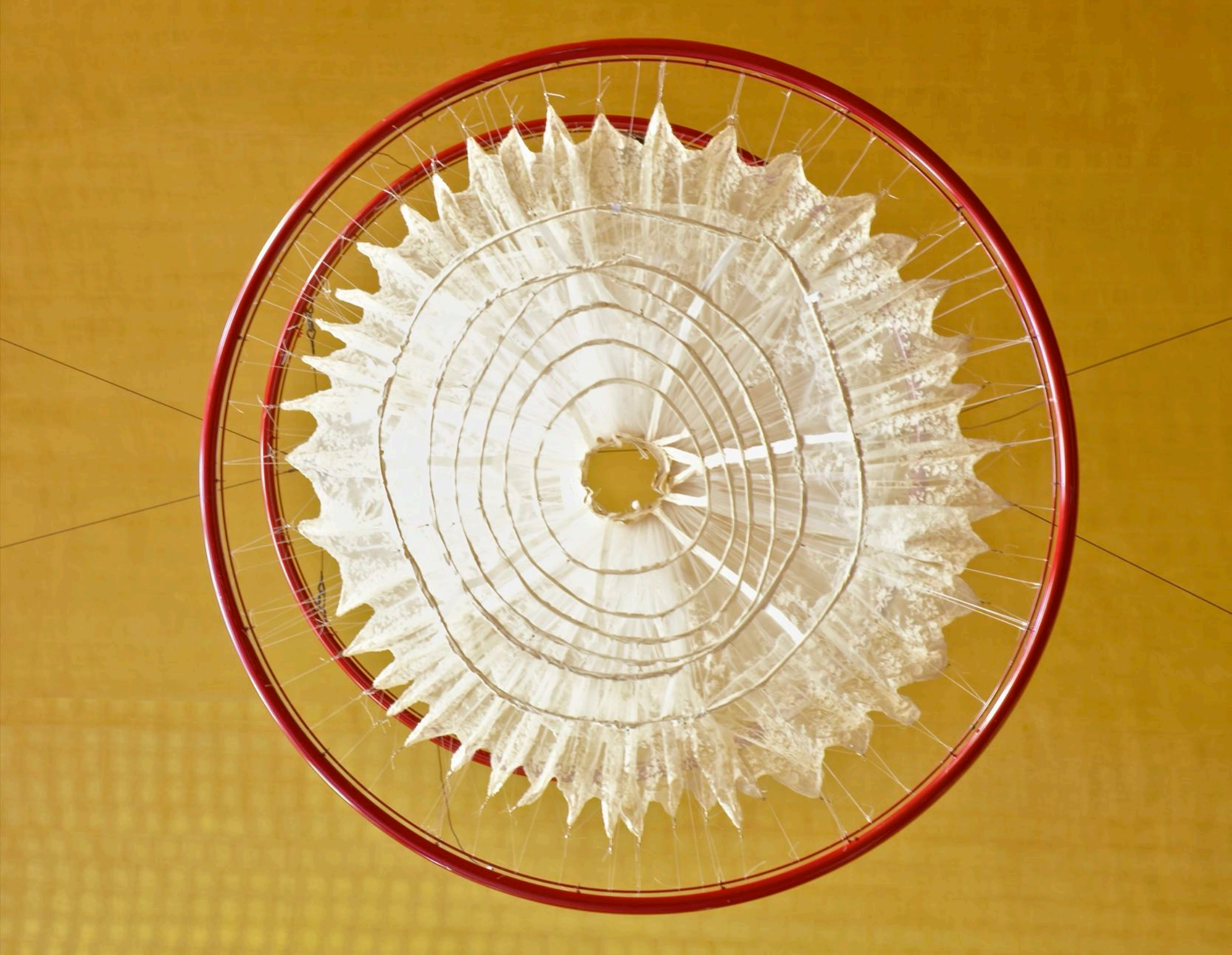
In my art, I use tension to suspend, stretch, and shred garments and to create forms that I liken to futurist abstract paintings in three-dimensions. Their abstraction is melodramatic, powerful, and lyrical, suggesting continued motion. My intention is not to create a moment of violence, but to transform rigid symbols, thereby reinterpreting the social constructs of my cultural surroundings. The challenge with this installation was to do justice to the retired costumes, which still have a majesty and degree of craftsmanship unlike any I'd ever encountered. I wanted the sculptures to reflect and refract the specific roles the costumes had played. What helped me in imagining new forms for these costumes was all the evidence of life that I found inside them: multiple alterations, perspiration stains, dirt from dragging frilly petticoats across the stage for countless performances, makeup smudged around the collars, and layers of tags sewn inside showing their provenance: the characters, the productions, the stages they'd played. I wanted to reanimate those lives and give them a future form in the theater's Promenade.

I worked with a team of volunteer assistants for two months in New York City Opera's costume archive. From hundreds of costumes, I selected those that spoke loudest to me, about how to approach them, how to connect with their history, and the story they seemed built to tell. Using monofilament and fishing tackle, the principal materials of my process, we first began working on the hem of Carmen's dress, lifting some points and letting others drape to form a tensile ripple. From the moment I saw that motion, with the gold-toned petticoat flickering like candlelight through the black polka dotted lace, I realized that each sculpture would have its own narrative and the slightest alteration of strings and gestures could re-imagine that story. We listened to Maria Callas' "La Habanera," Diamanda Galas' "Wild Woman With Steak Knives," and Wendy O. Williams' "Priestess," and our work with the garments became performative and improvisatory. With Butterfly, I imagined her as triumphant, ascendant, a victor. With Carmen, I let her wield the bloody knife, leaving its meaning ambiguous. The interplay between the story of the opera from which each costume came, the moment created by the sculpture, and the physicality of the transformed garment—its materials, its shapes, its colors, floating in this celestial space—is the work that I hope viewers of my installation will appreciate.

# VIOLETTA

VIOLETTA
(La Traviata, Verdi)

Violetta Valery's transformation from glittering high-society courtesan to self-sacrificing heroine constitutes one of opera's greatest portraits and has been the inspiration for countless works of literature, art, and film. Here, Violetta's gown has been transformed—broken in half, its lining torn out—but the prim, lacy dress and bones of the cage crinoline remain as a floating, spectral tribute to Violetta's strength of character and her desire to live a true life.



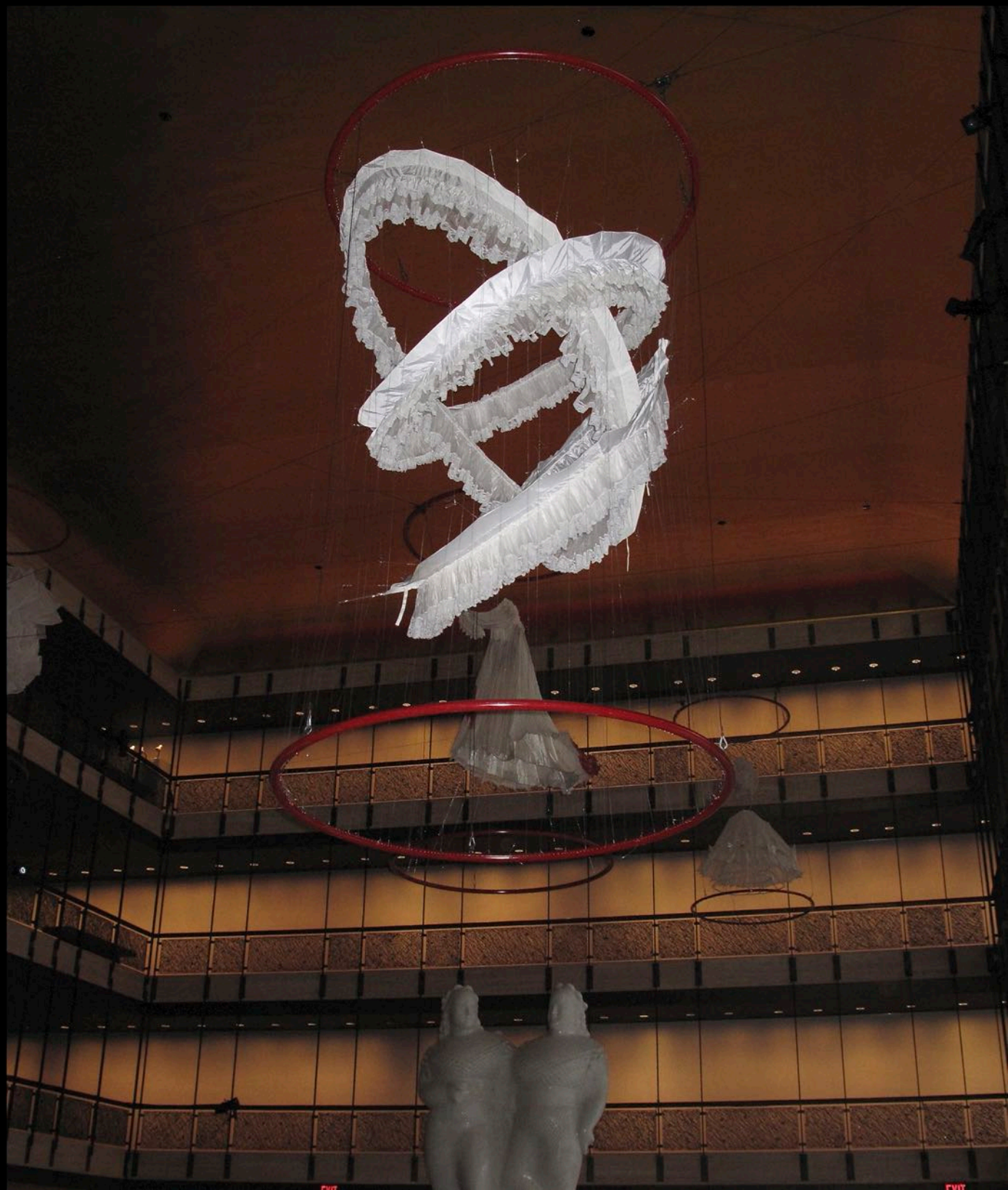
# LUCIA - BLOODY NIGHTIE

LUCIA - BLOODY NIGHTIE
(Lucia di Lammermoor, Donizetti)

Lucia Ashton's gradual descent into madness culminates in the tour de force "Mad Scene," in which Lucia appears before her horrified wedding guests in a nightgown stained with the blood of the husband she has just killed. In the sculpture, Lucia's bloodied gown—a garment staple of opera costume collections—assumes a trance-like stillness; the fabric has a dull patina, like the weathered marble of a Hellenistic statue, which seems fitting, since her fate was carved by others.

# SHOCK WAVE

Petticoats are a convention of female opera costumes, adding volume and drama to the gown of each diva and maximizing the visual impact of her character. The petticoats' allure also lies in the suggestion that it is the boundary between the inside and the outside of the dress. A glimpse at its ruffles during a dance step or dramatic swish is an exciting reminder of the flesh buried underneath the yards of fabric. Here, the three suspended crinoline frills orbit each other, taking on forms suggesting sultry smoke rings, the jaws of a whale or a shark, or the vapor trail left behind from a supersonic fly-by.



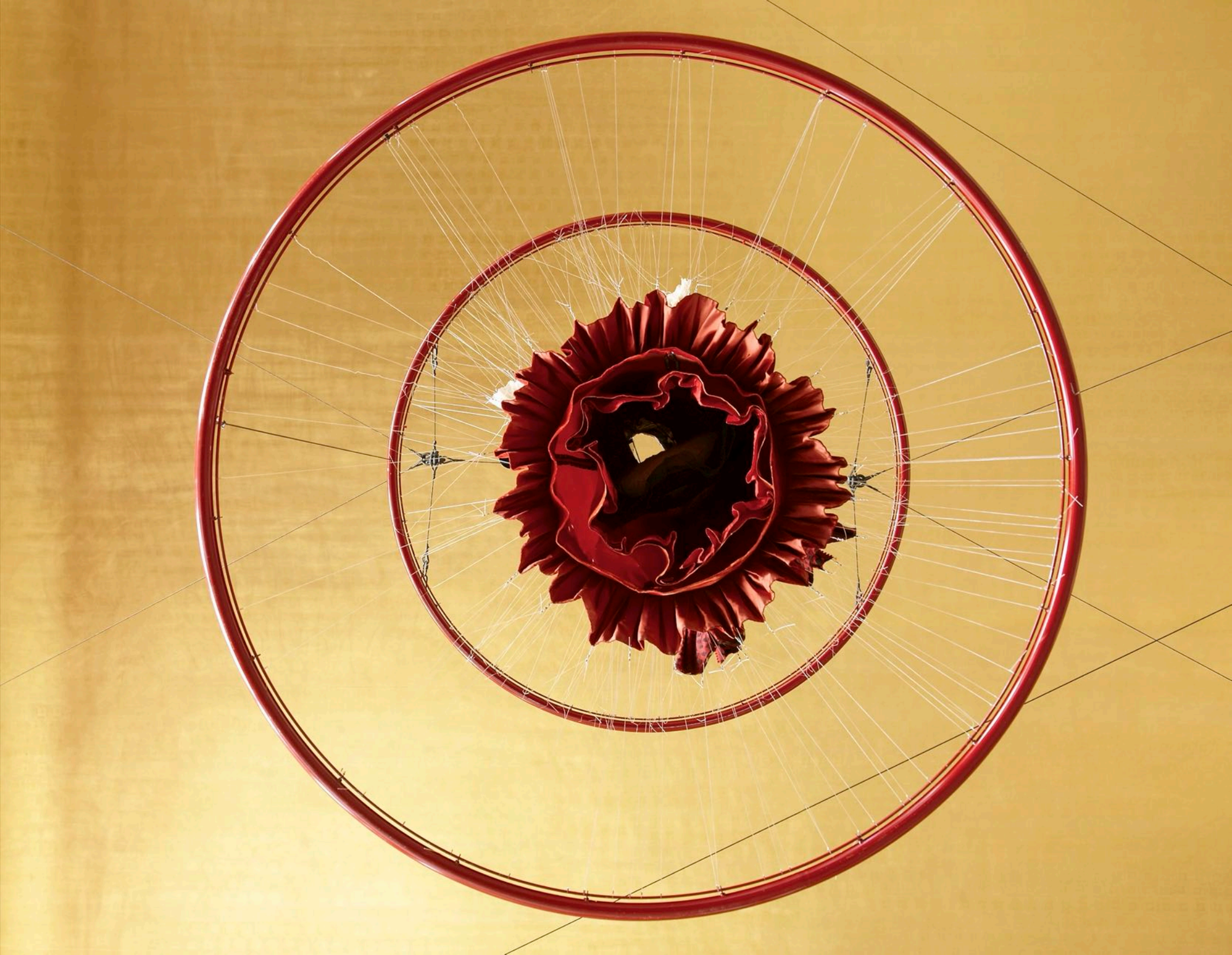
# HATS

A selection of fanciful millinery from several operas are clustered into a column of shimmery opulence. The velour dreadlocks that dangle from Turandot's conical caps; the Romanesque helmets crafted from gilded leather, rope and feathers; the bejeweled turbans from Casanova; and golden veils from The Magic Flute, all suggest the exotic landscapes—fictitious and real—evoked in these operas.

# MIMI - RIGOR MORTIS

MIMI - RIGOR MORTIS
(La Bohème, Puccini)

The most popular work in the operatic repertory, La bohème recounts the sad tale of the seamstress Mimì; from her rapturous love for the dashing poet Rodolfo to her tragic demise from a dreaded disease, dying in the freezing cold in the arms of her love. This exquisite example of a bustled Victorian dress in red velvet, with its laced bodice and satin ribbon, is so architecturally constructed it practically stands on its own. The figure of the unyielding dress, hovering like a headless sleep-walking zombie, seems frozen in the moment she reaches for her lover.



# THE CLOWN

THE CLOWN
(Pagliacci, Leoncavallo)

Based on a true story, Pagliacci introduces us to the clown Canio, who is driven to violent desperation when his wife's adultery is exposed. This leads to an on-stage confrontation and ultimately to his murder by the audience that once loved him. Here, Canio's costume is suspended in a moment of free-fall surrounded by daggers. It is as though he just jumped from the Pavilion's balcony, referencing his untethering from reality, an impression reinforced by the minimum of strings that hold the sculpture in place.

# MANON - GHOST ANGEL

MANON - GHOST ANGEL
(Manon, Massenet)

Manon Lescaut's triumphant rise to fame and fortune, followed by her devastating fall into poverty and despair, was a tremendous vehicle for the myriad talents of famed soprano Beverly Sills, a longtime champion of New York City Opera. Here, a duplicate of the billowing golden gown worn by Sills in the role of Manon is transformed to highlight the costume's gossamer silhouette, its weightless sweep assuming the form of an angel. Set in the center of the Promenade facing the plaza of Lincoln Center, Manon's outstretched arms welcome the audience into the David H. Koch Theater.

# SKIRT CHASER

SKIRT CHASER
(Don Giovanni, Mozart)

Although he callously seduces thousands of women and acts like the epitome of entitlement, Don Giovanni remains an irresistible force of nature, attractive to women and audiences alike. In this sculpture, Giovanni's black fur-lined embroidered gloves thrust toward crotchless bloomers from above and below a single crinoline, made with as many layers of frills as his fabled conquests.

# MERRY WIDOW

MERRY WIDOW
(The Merry Widow, Lehár)

This sparkling operetta recounts the tale of wealthy widow Hanna Glawari, the most sought-after woman in Pontevedro. However, this charming young woman only has eyes for an old flame who refuses to be caught. Through her allure and a slight bending of the truth, she wins back the heart and trust of her former beau. Upside down, her dress functions as a goblet or reservoir for her fortune, which many men seek. Her petticoat is lined with gold lamé and her arms flex in exasperation.

# CINDERELLA

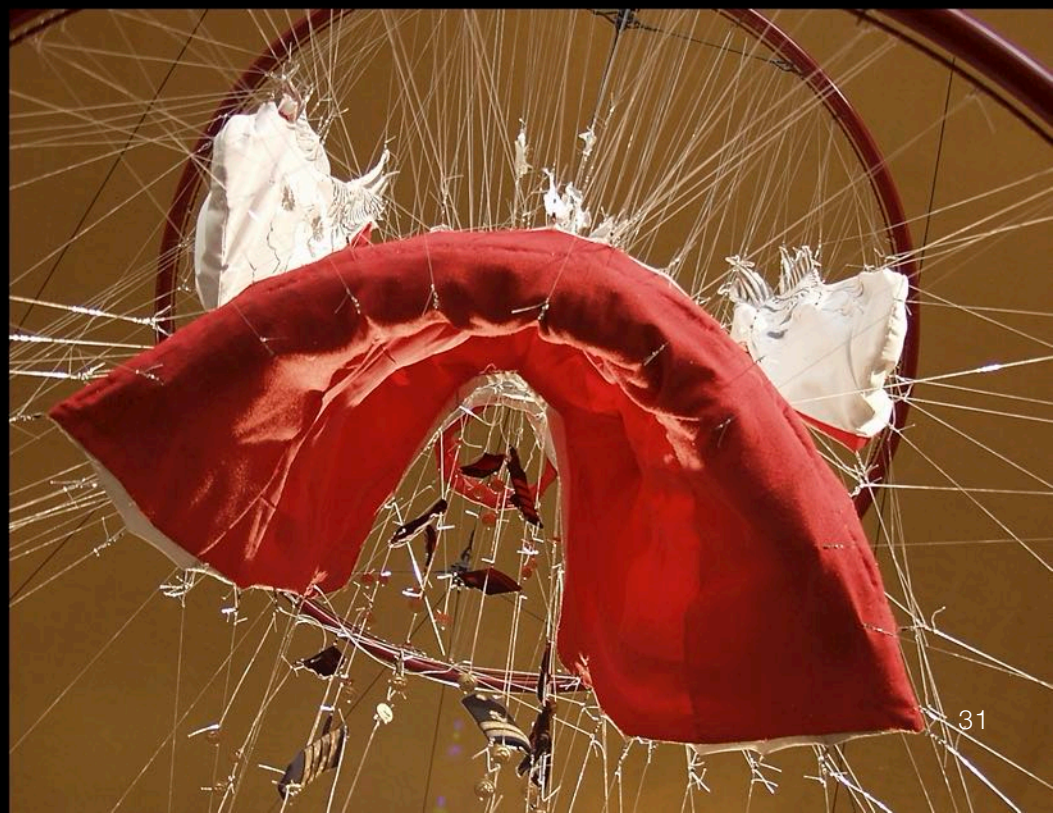
CINDERELLA: DISTRESSED PEASANT/PRINCESS

This sculpture is composed of two Cinderella dresses that symbolize her transformation: the white, cake-like “Princess” dress with its pearls and panniers, and a dress found on a rack of the costume archive labeled “Distressed Peasant.” Ironically, the peasant dress is more a marvel of handiwork and artifice—its luscious cashmere woven to look like burlap, its hand-made lace hand-torn and rubbed with ink to look sooty, and its silk velvet corselette punched with holes. The bloated, regal Princess dress splits down the back, and the cicada-like, deluxe dishevelment erupts.

# BUTTERFLY

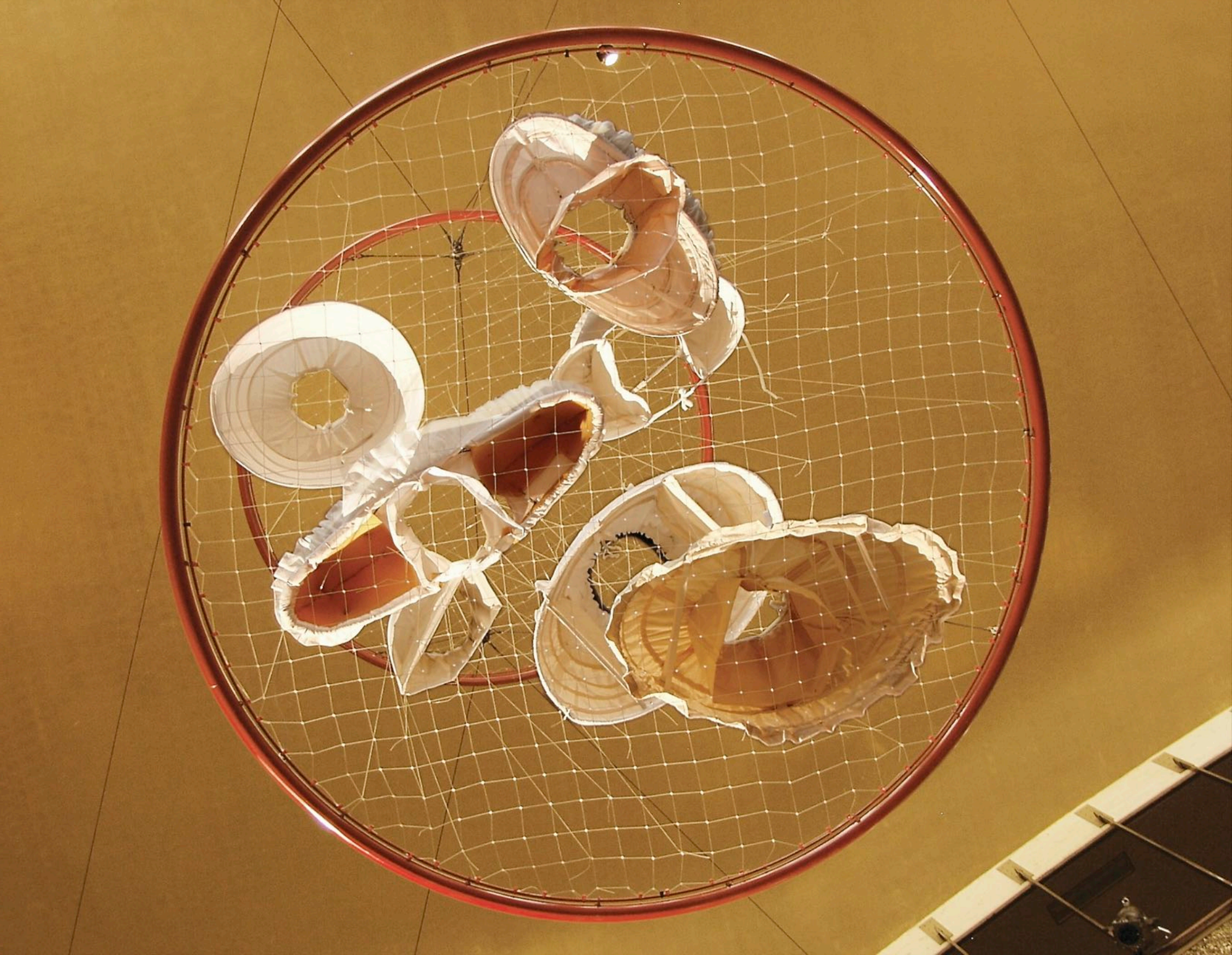
BUTTERFLY
(Madama Butterfly, Puccini)

The heart-breaking tale of the genteel geisha Cio-Cio-San, known as Butterfly, and her love for the American naval officer B. F. Pinkerton poignantly depicts the tragic consequences of cultural misunderstandings. Here, the silver cranes embroidered on Cio-Cio-San's wedding kimono are sliced out and fly away, symbols of happiness and youth, transforming the iconic costume into an image of triumph. Like debris, naval epaulettes dangle beneath her kimono as she blasts off to the heavens as a winged victory.



# BUSTLES AND PANNIERS

Each undergarment here was designed to support weight and show off opulent fabric while exaggerating the female form. The dramatically-expanded hips of the bustles make the waist appear smaller. When unrobed and naked these hovering armatures bring to mind zeppelins, weather balloons, UFOs, or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles with GPS systems.



# CARMEN

CARMEN
(Carmen, Bizet)

One of the most notorious women in opera, the willful and fiercely independent Carmen is the ultimate operatic gypsy. In this sculpture, the gold fabric of Carmen's Spanish-style gypsy dress appears tough as armor, glinting between ruffles of black polka dotted tulle. The dress is pulled in all directions so it appears puffed-out and spiky, like a blowfish. Here, it is Carmen—not Don Jose—who wields the bloody knife, warning that "Love is a rebellious bird" and staying true to her word.

# For City Opera Costumes, Lofty New Roles

THE NEW YORK TIMES: October 20, 2009 By RANDY KENNEDY

NORTH BERGEN, N.J. — In deepest urban New Jersey, just off the hellish Routes 1 and 9, past the Lincoln Tunnel Motel and the Hoboken cemetery, sits an unlikely place that might be thought of as opera heaven. Or maybe opera purgatory, a cavernous building where hundreds of pieces of faux-ormolu-encrusted furniture, brass goblets, rubber plants and costumes — rack after elegant rack — end up when not in use in productions by New York City Opera, awaiting their next night on the stage. But for many of the costumes, the ones in odd sizes or past their prime, the wait is in vain, their requiems sung. And that is where E. V. Day comes in.

Over the last several months, while the opera has been preparing to begin its new season after extensive renovations to its home at Lincoln Center, the David H. Koch Theater, Ms. Day has been given free rein to rummage through its considerable closets. An artist best known for transforming clothing into sculpture material — deconstructed dresses arrested in the act of exploding, frighteningly dissected wetsuits, G-strings arrayed in fighter-jet formations — Ms. Day, 42, has described her work as "futurist abstract paintings in three dimensions," and as a means of examining social constructs, particularly the roles that clothes can impose on women.

But when George Steel, the opera's new general manager and artistic director, told Ms. Day that he was interested in commissioning her to create a temporary installation for the theater's grand promenade space, she was quickly plunged into a world of grand fiction and high tradition in which clothes don't just impose roles but also practically define them.

"I would be going through all these beautiful dresses that looked very similar initially, and I'd say to the costume people, 'Who might wear this one?' " Ms. Day recalled recently inside the opera's costume repository, where she has been working on the project since late August. "And without missing a beat they'd say, 'Oh that's Violetta from 'La Traviata.' "

The clothing that Ms. Day has transformed in her work for the opera — 13 pieces in all, which will go on view to the public on Nov. 6 and remain in place through the fall and spring seasons, suspended among the promenade's catwalks — is a veritable opera traditionalist's cast of characters. There is Don Giovanni, represented by his black gloves, one flying up a cloud of a crinoline skirt like a hawk attacking a flock of doves. There is Mimi from "La Bohème," represented by a stark-red velvet dress that is, like all of Ms. Day's work, suspended using dozens of pieces of fishing line attached to the cloth with fishing-tackle connectors called swivel snaps; in this case the dress looks as if an elegant form of rigor mortis had set in after tuberculosis claimed its owner. There is the lacy, ethereal shell of Manon's dress, a copy of one worn by Beverly Sills during a performance as the character in Massenet's opera. And Cio-Cio-San's kimono from "Madama Butterfly" is shown ascending in a kind of triumphant flight from her tragic fate.

No one was more surprised by the classical nature of the choices than Ms. Day. "I came into this knowing very little about opera," she said. "And when I started, they gave me carte blanche. I could pick whatever I wanted. I was just looking for some kind of organizing principle."

She considered hundreds of costumes that the opera's wardrobe department showed her. But as she began to listen to more opera ("We immediately equipped her with a huge mountain of CDs," Mr. Steel said) and to read more about it, she found herself drawn to the more timeless stories. "I started to get very involved," she said. "I got so revved up by these characters."

Mr. Steel, under whose leadership the opera has also mounted a show of the work of contemporary photographers like Ryan McGinley and Elinor Carucci in the promenade, said he had always felt strongly that opera should forge stronger connections with the contemporary art world. "This is not just an add-on," he said. "We're interested in a very central connection to the art that's being made today."

On a recent visit to the costume repository, Ms. Day took a reporter on a tour of what seemed like miles of racks, organized with labels like "choir, monk, robes, liturgical" and "matador" and "shepherdess" and "peasant, colorful" and "peasant, distressed." ("Distressed peasant" became a comic catchphrase for Ms. Day and everyone working with her over the last two months in New Jersey. "You'd ask somebody how they felt," she said. "And if it was a bad day, they'd say, 'Distressed peasant.' ")

As they worked, eventually using 22 miles of fishing line to create the sculptures, she and her helpers would often listen to opera — Maria Callas's "Habanera" from "Carmen," for example — but also to other operatically powerful women like Wendy O. Williams and Diamanda Galás.

For a sculptor whose raw material is clothing, Ms. Day said there were days, even in the dark and sometimes frigid costume building, when she felt as if she were in heaven. “This is couture,” she said, pointing out the intricate, tiny beadwork on a dress, details that would probably be lost even to operagoers in the first row. “There are no glue guns with these clothes, no Bedazzlers. These are all hand-stitched. It’s an art form.” Partly because of this, many of the costumes have remained more or less intact, unlike, say, the exploded replica of Marilyn Monroe’s famous white halter dress in “Bombshell,” Ms. Day’s piece in the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

In an essay she wrote to accompany this exhibition, she says that “what helped me in imagining new forms for these costumes was all the evidence of life that I found inside them: multiple alterations, perspiration stains, dirt from dragging frilly petticoats across the stage so many miles, makeup smudged around the collars and layers of tags sewn inside showing their provenance: the characters, the productions, the stages they’d played.”

“I wanted to reanimate those lives,” she added, “and give them a future form in the promenade.”

Besides the pieces based on costumes of particular characters, she also created one that showcased only hats, another for women’s outlandish undergarments like hoops and panniers and another for men’s accouterments like tricorn hats, codpieces and dickeys. “The guys are such peacocks in so many of the productions,” Ms. Day said.

Walking around the Koch Theater’s promenade last week as riggers hoisted her creations into the air, she passed beneath the Don Giovanni sculpture, and a visitor remarked on the crotchless pink bloomers visible under the crinoline skirt.

“I asked about bloomers, and the costume people said that if they were worn, they’d be like that, so that the wearer of all this complicated clothing could sit on the chamber pot without getting completely undressed,” she said, smiling. “I just wanted to be as authentic as possible.”

“For my next pieces,” she added, “I’d really like to do something just about all the underwear. It’s so amazing.”









# E.V. DAY WISHES TO THANK

From New York City Opera:
Bettina Bierly, Scott Brodsky, Joseph Gasperec, Chuck Giles, James Holder, Tess James, Scott Levine, Isabel Martin, Shara Siegel, George Steel, Karen White, Susan Woelzl, and Edward Yim

Jeffrey Deitch and Andrea Cashman from Deitch Projects and Ted Lee and The Lee Bros. Simple Fresh Southern Cookbook

Photographers:
Tristan Cook, Vinny Dilio, Sara Krulwich, Nelson Hancock, Michael Sharkey, John Kitzen and Adam Reich

Artist Assistants:
Lawrence Mitchell (E.V. Day Studio: Project Manager), Josana Blue, Jin Jung, Jae Kyung Kim, Nina Damato, Chaz Ganster, Lisa Soghomonian, Zoe Latta, Catrin Loyd-Bollard, Julia Friedman, Amy Cook, Andrew Knox, Julia Knox, Gabriel Velasquez, Sabrina Lesard, Kelly Chambers, Chelisa Patterson, Zoe Dunn, Courtnay Saunders, Duncan Scovil, Jana Liptak, Meg Moseley, Tanja Marcetic, Angy Wills, Kate Friedberg and Pilita Garcia

Photo: Michael Sharkey

E.V. Day is a New York based artist whose work explores themes of sexuality and humor while employing gravity-defying suspension techniques. By manipulating iconic imagery from popular culture, Day re-animates the recognizable into new forms that illuminate contradictions in gender roles and stretch the confines of social stereotypes. Recently awarded the prestigious Rome Prize for Visual Arts by the American Academy in Rome, Day worked for a year in the Eternal City where she continued a twenty-year practice of creating sculptures that interact with, and respond to renowned architectural spaces.

The first work in her Exploding Couture series, *Bombshell*, included in the 2000 Biennial of The Whitney Museum of American Art, was suspended in the lobby of The Breuer Building, and is now in the Museum's permanent collection. Day has had numerous solo exhibitions, including the installation *G-Force* at The Whitney Museum at Altria in 2001, in which she suspended hundreds of thongs from the ceiling in fighter-jet formations, and a survey exhibition at the I.M. Pei-designed Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University in 2004. *Bride Fight*, a high-tension string-up of two dueling bridal gowns, was exhibited at Lever House as part of their collection in 2006. In 2010, she exhibited *Divas Ascending*, a 14-sculpture installation at Lincoln Center created from costumes from the archives of the New York City Opera—an exhibition that traveled to The Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts in 2011, to The Houston Grand Opera in 2012, to The Memphis Brooks Museum in 2019, and The Taubman Museum from 2021 to 2023.